

Carnap's Pragmatic Framework

In his paper "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" Carnap develops a distinction between internal and external questions to solve the problem of abstract entities. The objector suggests that external questions, which reduce to pragmatic questions for Carnap, are not free of what would seem to be internal considerations. In this paper, I will argue that the objector has located an important problem in Carnap's system and suggest a way in which Carnap might respond to this problem.

Carnap's project is to find a way of dealing with questions such as 'Are there really numbers?', 'Are there such things as properties?', etc. He proposes that these questions are misguided because they fail to notice a crucial distinction between internal and external frameworks. Internal questions come up within a particular framework. The question 'Is there a prime between 6 and 9?', for instance, comes up within the framework of mathematics. The answer to the question is clearly decidable given the rules of the framework. The question 'Is the number 7 a real entity?', however, is not decidable within the framework of mathematics and thus an external question.

The problem that Carnap has with external questions is that, without a framework, there is no way to decide what counts as evidence to take into account in deciding what is the answer to the question. He calls such questions noncognitive (16). An external question is "a pseudo-question, until both parties to the controversy offer a common interpretation of the question as a cognitive question; this would involve an indication of possible evidence regarded as relevant by both sides" (20). That is, until

both parties share a framework, such that they can agree on what counts as evidence for the truth or falsity of a particular statement, the question has no answer. Evidential considerations only arise within particular frameworks not outside of them.

For Carnap, external questions are merely pragmatic ones regarding which framework to adopt. Adopting a framework is a pragmatic decision about whether to take a particular linguistic framework for a given purpose (14,18). Since this adoption is a decision it is not truth-apt. It cannot be judged to be true or false but rather as being “more or less expedient, fruitful, conducive to the aim for which language is intended” (18). Here, however, is precisely where the objector disagrees. It is in deciding what framework is expedient and more conducive to a particular aim that we need to be sensitive to evidence. Evidence is relevant to making a judgment about whether taking up a particular framework would be fruitful.

Now one might wonder whether making a judgment of the type ‘adopting framework X is fruitful in achieving aim Y’ is truth-apt. Consider the following case. We decide to build a tree house together. Presumably we will be adopting several frameworks depending on which particular subplan we are engaged in. In the process of doing so we will engage in a lot of means-end reasoning. Furthermore, it seems that evidential considerations would play a role in us coming to make judgments regarding the suitability of a framework for a particular goal. If you were to tell me that you wanted to adopt the set theoretic framework to figure out how tall to make a particular beam, it seems that I would be justified in saying that it would be inefficient to use that framework. I would suggest that instead it would be better for our end to use the number framework. The question is, why am I justified in making this claim? One

might think that we both agree that there is good evidence that certain means are more efficient at achieving certain ends. If you disagreed I might point out that last time we used the set theoretic framework to build a tree house it took us three times as long. Carnap, however, suggests that our decision making process on whether to adopt a particular framework doesn't involve evidential considerations because it occurs outside our use of a particular framework.

Given that we seem to agree on what constitutes evidence for my efficiency judgment, a Carnapian could respond that we do in fact share a framework, a pragmatic one. This is a framework that we all share in making such decisions and that allows to decide what counts as evidence for making certain means-ends judgments. This framework is in the background and is always in use when we are deciding what other frameworks to adopt. We are never, even in making decisions, outside of a framework but always within one. We might suggest that there is a hierarchy of frameworks. The pragmatic one being the one at the very top and our decisions come to shape which frameworks constitute the rest of the hierarchy.

An interesting question arises if we decide to take this approach. What are our ontological commitments within the pragmatic framework? Notice that in the pragmatic framework we end up making normative judgments to the effect of 'this is a better means to a particular end' or 'this is the most efficient means for that particular end'. Are we committed to the existence of normative properties? It would seem like we are committed within the framework. In most other cases we take up a linguistic framework for a particular case and then stop using it once we no longer find it useful. So our commitments within those linguistic frameworks are limited to the moments at which we are using that particular framework.

The special problem the pragmatic framework poses is that it is a framework we can't kick away. It's not one we can take on for a particular goal and discard when we are done with it. It is the framework we must use to take up any other framework. Therefore, we find ourselves not being able to discard our commitment to these normative properties.

The Carnapian response to this puzzle would be to dismiss the question. After all, from what framework am I asking the question of the existence of normative properties? We don't seem to have a way of settling that question. The question, according to Carnap, becomes a pseudo-question. Unless we have a principled way of settling what would constitute an answer to such a question we are not asking a question that could have an answer. Nevertheless, we might find ourselves uneasy to dismiss the questions of what are our ontological commitments in adopting the pragmatic framework. It is the framework, after all, that we can't kick away and this makes our commitments within it seem more basic and important.

The objector has pointed out to an interesting and unsettling feature of Carnap's view. A possible Carnapian solution is to bite the bullet and admit that we do make pragmatic decisions within a framework. If we do take this response, the pragmatic framework appears to be one that we all must adopt. This led us to wonder whether, as a consequence, we are all committed to the existence of normative properties. Ultimately, however, Carnap has a way of applying his system so as to dismiss such issues. This dismissal, however, might make us uneasy since, if there is a pragmatic framework, it seems to be one that we are committed to in a fundamental way.